

MASTER
GESTÃO DE RECURSOS HUMANOS

MASTER'S FINAL WORK
DISSERTATION

HOW TO MAKE THEM STAY: ORGANIZATIONAL
METHODS TO RETAIN REPATRIATES

STEPHANIE KAZUE WHITE

SEPTEMBER - 2016

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SUPERVISION:

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Table of Contents

Abstract:	4
Resumo	5
Acknowledgements	6
1. Introduction	7
1.1 Background of the Problem	7
1.2 Research Questions and Significance of Study	9
2. Literature Review	11
2.1 Concepts and Research in Expatriation & Repatriation	11
2.2 Expatriate and Repatriate Management: Selection	13
2.3 Expatriate and Repatriate Management: Training and Career Development.....	16
2.4 Repatriate Turnover.....	19
3. Research Methodology	23
3.1 Data Collection & Participants	24
4. Results & Discussion	27
4.1 Personal Characteristics	27
4.2 Training	29
4.3 Organizational Support and Communication.....	34
4.4 Expectations and Career Development.....	37
5. Conclusion	41
References	44
Appendix A	48

Abstract:

The increase of globalization in the modern business world has made the concept of international assignments and expatriation one that all multinational organizations must consider. Repatriation, the final, and by some accounts the most difficult part of the expatriation process is one that is under researched and poorly managed. With a turnover rate of American repatriates between 20% to 50% in the early 21st century and it is an ongoing problem facing these organizations. This exploratory qualitative study investigates the efficacy of different organizational methods and their impact on repatriates' ultimate decision to stay or leave the organization. Topics focused on include training, organizational support and communication, and expectations and career development. The results confirm some earlier studies and name poor management of expectations and lack of career development as a primary cause of repatriate turnover.

Key words: expatriation, repatriation, repatriate turnover, training, organizational support, career development

Resumo

O aumento da globalização no mundo empresarial moderno fez com que o conceito de missões internacionais e expatriação tenha de ser considerado por todas as organizações multinacionais. O repatriamento, a última e segundo algumas teorias a parte mais difícil do processo de expatriação, é também uma das pior geridas e menos investigadas. Com um *turnover* de repatriados nos EUA entre 20% a 50% no início do século 21, este é um sério problema enfrentado por essas organizações. Este estudo qualitativo exploratório investiga a eficácia de diferentes métodos organizacionais e o seu impacto na decisão final dos repatriados de ficarem ou saírem da organização. Os tópicos focados incluem a formação, o apoio da organização e a comunicação, as expectativas e o desenvolvimento de carreira. Os resultados confirmam alguns estudos anteriores e apontam para a má gestão das expectativas e falta de desenvolvimento de carreira como uma das principais causas do *turnover* de repatriados.

Palavras chave: expatriação, repatriamento, , *turnover* de repatriados, formação, apoio da organização, desenvolvimento de carreira

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1. Introduction

The topic of expatriation and repatriation is a topic of study which compared to other fields of management or human resources management remains under researched, especially in regards to studies on the final phase of expatriation, repatriation, or the process of bringing an employee who was given a professional assignment overseas back to his/her home country (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright, 2011).

This final phase of the expatriation process, repatriation, is a phase which some consider the most challenging and has resulted in turnover rates between 20% and 50% within two years of a repatriate's return to their home country (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Black & Gregersen, 1999; Baruch, Steele, & Quantrill, 2002). This exploratory thesis study seeks to find out where organizations fail to keep their former expatriates in their personnel and what organizations can do to maintain these employees, or repatriates, after their return from international assignment.

1.1 Background of the Problem

While the amount of research into the topics of expatriation and repatriation is not ideal the topics began to gain some popularity in the 1980s and some of the research used by current scholars comes from articles and documents from the 1980s and 1990s. The research into the subject of expatriation largely focuses on the early phases of expatriation, more specifically the phases of

selection, training, and relocation and adjustment, phases identified by Scullion and Brewster (1997). The final phase of the expatriation process, repatriation, is the most under researched.

Research regarding expatriate failure is one of the most popular topics of research in this field and was defined by Brewster (1988:20) as “assignments from which expatriates had to be brought back home earlier than planned as a result of problems experienced by themselves or their families, or by problems they have created for the organization.” The scientific community generally accept this as the definition of expatriate failure but some such as Black and Gregersen (1999), consider it as an international assignment that ends in early return to the home country or turnover upon return from international assignment; the latter part of Black and Gregersen’s definition is otherwise known as repatriate turnover.

Repatriate turnover – the main focus of this thesis – has become an expensive and recurring problem in the international business community the cost of which exceeds USD\$1 million by some estimations (Mervosh and Mclenanhen, 1997; Stemler, 2001). The lack of significant research in this area in the late 20th and early 21st century has proven a detriment to the turnover rates of repatriates and thus a detriment to the hefty investments made by organizations in each international assignment.

Studies investigating the why of high rates of repatriate turnover include exploration into the impact familial relationships have on success or failure (Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou, 1987; Black and Stephens, 1989). Other research includes investigation into the effect organizational measures have on turnover rates (Stroh, Dennis, and Cramer, 1994; Feldman and Thomas, 1992, Cole and

Nesbeth, 2014; Lazaroova and Caliguiri, 2001; Van Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe, 2009). These authors have all come to the conclusion that measures taken or not taken by organizations affect the ultimate decision or inclination for a repatriate to turnover.

While the scientific community benefits from the work of these authors the most glaring problem lies in the lack of current studies. The early 21st century saw fewer studies on the topic of repatriation and the most commonly utilized pieces of work are those from the 1980s and 1990s. In order for the scientific community to make further advancements in this field of study and for businesses to take advantage of our knowledge further, studies must be carried out in order to discover if the ideas presented earlier continue to be relevant in the late 2010s.

1.2 Research Questions and Significance of Study

The lack of current scholarly investigation into the topic of repatriation turnover makes the need for new studies to be carried out very apparent. This study will try to determine what the organizational methods have the greatest impact on repatriate employees' ultimate decision to stay or leave an organization. Do these confirm or deny early scientific findings? And, in conclusion, will try to determine what methods can organizations use to retain their repatriates.

This thesis study is one of scholarly and practical importance. The consequences of repatriate turnover range from large to small but all bear a large price tag. Determining which organizational methods lead to higher repatriate retention will allow for organizations to keep their investment in these individuals and can benefit their organization with the knowledge and experience that an

international assignment has imparted upon their repatriate employees. The results of this study may also allow organizations to better plan and budget their spending on expatriate assignments and invest in the elements of the expatriation process that will give them the best return on their investment.

Scientifically, knowledge of effective methods of retaining repatriates may lead to insight into how to motivate other employees to accept international assignments and shed further light on organizational practices within this process of expatriation that can be improved or edited in some way. Most importantly the results of this study will provide insight into current practices of multinational organizations engaged in expatriation practices.

This study will begin with a presentation of the current literature on the subject of repatriation turnover followed by a detailed methodology to explain how the study was conducted. Then results and discussion of the results of this study will be presented and close with a conclusion, including limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concepts and Research in Expatriation & Repatriation

It is no secret that globalization is now the norm; with the development of social media and instantaneous communication of all kinds the world is becoming continually more entwined. The growing global economy and the increase in international investments, business partnerships, and growing economies have caused the number of expatriates and repatriates to grow every year. According to KPMG (2015), 83% of the global multinational organizations that participated in the study said their use of international assignees will remain the same or increase, this number rising to 90% for European organizations. The expectation of companies to conduct business overseas has moved from an option almost to a requirement of success. As a result, multinational companies are faced with sending their own employees overseas as expatriate representatives of the company.

Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (2011) define expatriates as employees who are assigned to work in another country and as such, expatriation is the process of sending employees from the parent country, the country in which an organization's headquarters is (Noe *et al*, 2011), to a foreign or 'host' country for work. However, this does not include short business trips for less than several months. In-patriates are those employees who are working in a host country (Noe *et al*, 2011). Repatriation as defined by Griffin and Pustay (2007) is bringing a manager back home after a foreign assignment has been completed; the managers in question are referred to forthwith as repatriates.

With the popularity of expatriation as a modern business practice there has been a significant amount of research on the topic. The process of expatriation includes planning, recruitment, selection, training, followed by relocation and adjustment, and the final part, repatriation (Scullion and Brewster, 1997). Expatriation research has primarily focused on the early stages of expatriation rather than the final, and one of the most important parts of the expatriation process, repatriation. While a part of this process, the last phase of expatriation, repatriation (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001; Kraimer, Saffer and Bolino, 2009), remains highly uninvestigated and as such will be the topic at hand.

A very common term in the literature is expatriate failure. Expatriate failure is defined by Black and Gregersen (1999) as an international assignment that ends in early return to the home country or turnover upon return from international assignment.

Because of the extensive research on the topic of expatriation we know it to be a process that is very challenging. According to Mendenhall, Dunbar, and Oddou(1987), problems that face expatriates can include “culture shock, differences in work-related norms, isolation, homesickness, differences in healthcare, housing, schooling, cuisine, language, customs, sex roles, and cost of living” among others. For this reason and the frequency of expatriate failure we understand these challenges to be on some occasions, insurmountable.

If an employee is strong enough, and these challenges are all met, one negative scenario upon his/her successful return from assignment is turnover. Turnover, as Griffin and Pustay (2007) say, is the opposite of retention and refers to when an employee leaves the organization. Furthermore, repatriate turnover is

the action of a returning expatriate leaving the organization shortly after returning from international assignment.

2.2 Expatriate and Repatriate Management: Selection

The management of expatriates and repatriates is an important topic of study as effective management of these individuals throughout all phases of the process means effective International Human Resources Management, an important element that can affect entire organizations (Griffin and Pustay, 2007).

The first and arguably the most important part of expatriation is the recruitment and selection of a suitable candidate. Much research has been devoted to this topic as it has been seen as a big factor in determining expatriate failure. Mercer's 2011 Worldwide Survey of International Assignment Policies and Practices found that 62% of participating companies rated poor candidate selection as a cause of expatriate failure, understood in this case as early return from assignment. Thankfully, in recent years, these numbers have improved, but the 2015 Survey, also by Mercer, reported that 44% of participating companies still listed poor candidate selection as the number one cause of expatriate failure.

When recruiting and selecting for an overseas position the methods used for selection have changed over the years. Mendenhall et al (1987) report that early methods of expatriate selection were primarily based on "technical competence", because of the belief that successfully managing a company is a "scientific art" and an executive or manager who is able to complete a task in New York will be able to do so in Hong Kong as well. Mendenhall et al pointed out the work of other authors and agreed that there should be more selection processes to

determine the relational, cross-cultural, and interpersonal skills of their candidates. Appropriate selection mechanisms must also be enacted in order to avoid family factor problems such as those mentioned in Cole and Nesbeth (2014). Their qualitative study of 64 participants from 64 different expatriated families noted four sets of factors leading to expatriate failure 9 (in this case, early return from assignment): job and work environment factors, family factors, organizational support, and contextual factors in the host country. The study revealed that the two most significant of those factors were family/spousal difficulties and organizational support. Some of the family problems Cole and Nesbeth's participants experienced included alcoholism, erratic behaviors, and separation; disappointing organizational support also included complete abandonment after arrival in the host country and constant debate over housing policies and travel arrangements. One of the participants even reported that a lack of support on the part of the organization resulted in all six expatriates in the host country eventually repatriated to their parent country early.

As a consequence, Mendenhall et al (1992) also highlights the need for testing the adaptability potential of the spouse and family of the potential expatriate in addition to the expatriate himself.

Later studies have supported the need for a method of selection that goes beyond technical competence. Arthur and Bennett (1995) conducted a study of 338 expatriates from more than twenty countries in order to determine factors perceived to contribute to the success of expatriates. Arthur and Bennett correctly hypothesized that psycho-social factors such as relational, interpersonal, and family situation would be relatively more important than technical and job

knowledge factors suggesting that psycho-social factors may carry equal or more importance to the success of an expat than their technical skills. Unfortunately, the 2012 Global Relocation Trends Survey reported that objectives for international assignment were first and foremost to fill a technical skills gap.

More recent developments in the methodology of selecting expatriates have attempted to further specify the criteria in order to screen for intercultural and relational skills in potential expatriates. For example, Graf (2004) carried out a study of 54 American and 58 German managers to determine the importance of intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity. The study confirmed that the existence of intercultural communication skills and intercultural sensitivity skills has a significant effect on the ability to facilitate international tasks. The study further suggests that while the knowledge of culture and language skills can be learned in the short term, the skills that should be screened for in the selection process are those of an intercultural sensitivity nature as these skills cannot be learned in the short term and are crucial to the success of international tasks.

2.3 Expatriate and Repatriate Management: Training and Career Development

While the importance of the selection of the right candidate for the job cannot be understated, organizational support is important to the success of the expatriation process and especially to the frequency of repatriation turnover. Organizational support encompasses all phases of the expatriation process including repatriation. The first element of this support is the element of training.

As a part of the expatriation process, expatriates and repatriates are no strangers to training, or they shouldn't be. At the beginning of the repatriation research Black and Gregersen's (1991) suggested that only 62% of American multinational organizations provided cross-cultural training before the expatriate's departure from the parent country. This cross-cultural training refers to the training used to prepare employees and their family members for an assignment in a foreign country (Noe, 2011). This training may include information on common business practices and general cultural knowledge. Thankfully, business practice has evolved since Black and Gregersen's study and the 2011 Global Relocation Trends survey reports that this percentage has risen to 81% of American Companies, with 60% extending this training to the family as well.

Stroh (1995) conducted a study in the mid-1990s based on the responses from 51 different human resources specialists from 51 different American multinational companies in order to discover if certain variables were significant indicators of repatriate turnover rates. One such variable was training. Stroh hypothesized that "Multinational corporations that provide pre-departure training before expatriates return to their parent company will have lower turnover rates

than multinationals that do not. (Stroh, 1995:446)” Her research suggested that because of the similarities between the training and career development plan construct, which was strongly linked to lower turnover rates, pre-departure training before returning to the parent country would have a similar effect on repatriate turnover rates.

As previously mentioned, the study published by Stroh in 1995 also tested for a career development construct. Stroh’s research strongly supported the work of Feldman and Thomas (1992). Feldman and Thomas provide seven strategies¹ they believe that organizations can utilize in order to retain repatriates. Stroh’s research supported their finding and confirms that human resources professionals in organizations that value international experience who spend resources on the career development of repatriates are more likely to have lower levels of repatriation turnover.

While Stroh’s study attempts to relate this question of training in connection with turnover, other studies choose instead to focus on this question of career development and poor general organizational treatment of employees, a well-documented problem in the existing literature.

In a study of over 150 multinational executives, Allen and Alvarez (1998) published findings of their exploration into the reasons for ineffective repatriation. In the article, Allen and Alvarez highlight that in their study some of their respondents reported limited job opportunities for repatriates, the common party

¹ Feldman and Tomas 1992 strategies are as follows: (1) providing opportunities for expatriates to use their skills upon their return to their home office (in this study called Corporate Values of international assignments), (2) ensuring that the expatriates’ assignments fit into an overall career plan (in this study called Career Development Plan), (3) ensuring that a job awaits the employees upon their return (included in the Career Development Plan scale), (4) ensuring that their foreign assignments do not impede the expatriates’ career advancement (included in the Career Development Plan scale), (5) giving employees realistic job previews (Predeparture Training) and (6) having a successful mentor programme (Mentor). Data on the effect of having the freedom to accept or reject a foreign assignment were not available in this data set.

line being: although the company valued them and would like to put them in a better job, no other job was available at the time of return, a reflection of poor planning on the part of the organization. Additionally, although international experience is touted as a general valuable experience many of the study's participants reported that upon returning to their parent country they found that they had regressed in their career paths and others lacking international experience were promoted.

More recently, Jassawalla and Sashittal (2009) carried out a study of 40 male and 10 female managers with the purpose of developing strategies to reincorporate repatriated managers into the parent country's office. In this study only two of the 50 participants reported being satisfied with their post-repatriation career and more than half of the participants reported significantly high levels of ambivalence and dissatisfaction to the home office. All 50 of the participants cited their organizations as unprepared and unconcerned with their return to the parent country with one even citing their post-repatriation career as an organizational afterthought.

This trend has continued after Jassawalla and Sashittal's study and in Brookfield's Global Relocation Survey 82% of companies said no, their company does not have a formal repatriation strategy linked to career management/planning and retention. A shockingly high number considering in the same report reasons that motivated repatriate turnover were a lack of opportunity to use international experience at work (16%) and 34% said that new role expectations were not met. These same human resource respondents to the survey characterized the international assignment's impact on careers as 43% more likely

to be a future leader but only 23% lead to more rapid or frequent promotions, a clear underutilization of their repatriates' profiles.

2.4 Repatriate Turnover

The academic community has been exploring the field of expatriation with vigor for the last 30 years but this same passion has yet to truly explore the importance of repatriation or repatriation turnover.

According to some of the earliest studies of repatriates, American companies report losing 20-25% of repatriated employees within the first year after their return from overseas (Black *et al*, 1992), whilst other companies report percentages as high as 50% within the first two years (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Baruch *et al*, 2002).

Unfortunately, in recent years these numbers have not decreased. The Brookfield Global Relocation Trends Report began in 1995 and is considered to be one of the most reliable surveys on global relocation and data trends. The report consistently includes organizations headquartered in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region. In 2012 it reported that 22% of repatriates chose to leave the company within 12 months, 26% leaving between one and two years after repatriation, and 28% leaving more than two years after returning to their home country. Further proving that although expatriation and repatriation continue to be common business practices, repatriation turnover is still a problem facing multinational organizations.

These repatriation turnover rates should be cause for alarm because each expatriate represents a significant investment on the part of the company. If an

expatriate is sent abroad alone the cost is by itself very high, with overall remuneration packages sometimes doubling initial value; but when he/she is sent with his/her family the overall cost of the expatriation package may include costs such as schooling, additional training, language courses, and psychological support that extends to more than just the employee himself. As such, the loss of a repatriate can be the loss of an investment that Mervosh and McLenanhen (1997) estimate to be between USD\$600,000 and USD\$1.25 million Stemler (2001) reports similar numbers of between USD\$300,000 and USD\$1 million per expat depending on the overall package.

While the dollar amount of an investment is obviously an important component of a problem facing companies, in addition to the financial loss, there is also the intellectual loss. Companies who lose their repatriated employees not only lose some of their high-performing, highly valuable employees (Allen and Alvarez, 1998), but also all of the knowledge and skills that those employees gained while on overseas assignment.

If these repatriates represent such a large investment then what affects this rate of turnover? Of these studies, a connection has been found to exist between spouse and family-related factors as indicators of future success or failure (Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou, 1987; Black and Stephens, 1989). More relevant to this thesis, there is evidence suggesting that organizational measures also have an impact on the possibility of failure or success (Stroh, Dennis, and Cramer, 1994; Feldman and Thomas, 1992, Cole and Nesbeth, 2014).

Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) also found in their study that repatriates who perceived higher levels of organizational support had lower intentions to leave the

organization and further suggested that the key to retention of repatriates lies in creating an environment that values international experience and provide support throughout the entire expatriate experience from pre-departure to return.

In a study of a Dutch multinational organization by Van Heijden, Van Engen, and Paauwe (2009), 100 in-and expatriate employees completed a questionnaire to discover the relationship between perceived career support, perceived career prospects in the home organization, intention to leave (turnover), perceived career prospects outside the home organization, and expatriate performance. The subsequent results implied multinational companies can control their repatriate turnover rates. If repatriates decide to leave it is a direct result of internal, organizational factors that can be controlled such as a lack of career support. The study suggests that multinational organizations could benefit from the implementation of career support or planning programs to combat the high price of turnover. More specifically, a positive relationship was found between perceived career support and perceived career prospects in their home organization. Furthermore, it also found that the more perceived career support the expatriates experience, the less likely they would be to turnover. The entire study thoroughly supports the important role of career support and its mitigating effect on intentions to turnover.

Hand in hand with organizational support is job satisfaction. One of the primary reasons why employees accept an international position is the belief that it will be beneficial for their career (Suutari and Brewster, 2003). Eugenia, Vidal, Sanz's study (2007) investigated the antecedents of job satisfaction and its influence on repatriates intention to turnover. Their findings provided evidence

that high satisfaction of repatriates with their job upon return from international assignment reduced their intention to leave the organization. Eugenia et al's study further supported what we know from Black et al (1999), that the accuracy of often very positive job and career expectations (Pickard, 1999) is very important. As such, meeting these expectations would create job satisfaction.

Sanches, Spector, and Cooper (2000) provided evidence of repatriates returning from assignment only to accept jobs at other companies because of a lack of follow-through on promises made by their organization in regards to their career path. One of the repatriates, an executive, "returned to the U.S. to find an organization whose top management had radically changed and seemed unwilling to fulfill his previous bosses' promises of upward promotion" (Sanchez et al, 2000,104). Another executive "was disappointed to learn that his employer planned to repatriate him to a relatively low-level management job back home [...] Dissatisfied with the repatriation offer, the executive quit his job and started an import-export partnership with one of the business acquaintances he had made during his assignment in" (Sanches *et al*, 2000:104).

Furthering this path of research, Vidal, Valle, and Aragon (2008) carried out a study of 124 Spanish repatriates from both Spanish and international companies in the form of a questionnaire. Vidal *et al* sought to find a connection between repatriates' satisfaction and turnover rates and to identify the major factors influencing repatriates' satisfaction with the repatriation process. Their study found evidence that the satisfaction with the repatriation process reduced turnover intentions. Their study determined that some determinants of repatriation satisfaction with the process on an organizational level include "how

the company manages the professional career of the workers, the clarity in its repatriation practices and how accurate the work expectations employees generate before repatriating are. (Vidal *et al*, 2008, 1697)”

3. Research Methodology

The research for this thesis was carried out in a qualitative tradition through the use of semi-structured personal interviews. Semi-structured interviews using a set of specific open-ended questions were chosen over other qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews, in the interest of controlling the conversation in order to “gain historical information and have control over the line of questioning” (Creswell, 2009) and for ease of data analysis.

The decision to use a qualitative method of data collection rather than a quantitative one was borne from two primary motivations. The first of which being that, because of the topic of the study, a quantitative method of questionnaire or survey would not yield the quality or quantity of information required of each of the study participants. In using this qualitative method, it was possible to acquire additional relevant information, explanation and follow-up questions were possible, and participants were given the opportunity to make their anecdotes a contributing part of the study.

The second motivation behind this choice in favor of semi-directed qualitative interviews was a result of a problem of access, in other words, the number of participants available to participate in the study. Because of the required characteristics of the participants, the sample size was small, less than

twenty, and as such a quantitative study would be inappropriate and render traditional statistical data irrelevant (Creswell, 2009).

As a result, the data obtained in this study must be understood as strictly exploratory, with no capacity for generalization.

3.1 Data Collection & Participants

At the start of the empirical research for this study, countless efforts were made to find Portuguese former expatriates. However, it proved difficult to find Portuguese former expatriates willing to speak about their experiences.. This may have happened given the relatively low level of expatriation existing in Portuguese companies or the difficulty of entering formal and informal networks where such access would be granted. As a result the choice was made to switch to American former expatriates within my personal network, within which I was able to conduct interviews with eight former expatriates.

The duration for data collection for this exploratory study occurred from May 2016 through the month of August 2016. In this period of four months semi-structured interviews were conducted with American former expatriates using digital video conferencing technology such as Facetime or Skype or via telephone with duration of forty-five minutes to one hour. All of the interviewees requested to remain anonymous.

During the same period, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with senior Portuguese Human Resources Managers face-to-face and with the same duration of forty-five minutes to one hour. Criteria for choosing the companies where these managers work included medium to large organizations

that regularly conducted business in countries outside of Portugal or were classified as multinational organizations. Three interviews were conducted and the persons and companies in question requested to remain anonymous.

All of these semi-structured interviews were recorded and then analyzed using what Creswell (2009) calls a basic qualitative analysis “that is a generic form of analysis. In this approach the researcher collects qualitative data, analyzes it for themes or perspectives, and reports four to five themes.”

These semi-structured interviews, particularly the ones with former expatriates, were divided into five sections: personal characteristics, training, organizational support and communication, expectations; and the final part of the interview was left to ask for specific examples or additional elaboration on any previous topics. The semi-structured interviews with Human Resource Managers covered the same topics, although using a general and not individualized perspective. The choice of the topics and the associated questions stem primarily from the literature review; the outline of the interviews can be found in the appendix.

In the study two groups of participants were created: Group A and Group B. Group A (See Table 1) was comprised of senior Human Resources Managers in Portuguese organizations who had been in their position for a minimum of five years.

Group B was comprised of international former expatriates; participants were required to be (or had been) employees of a multinational organization, had an international assignment contact with a period lasting for a minimum of six

months, and must have repatriated back to their home country after successful completion of their assignment.

All participants were found via personal networking. Participants were informed before agreeing to participate of the topic of the interviews, average duration of the interviews, to what extent the content of the interviews would be used, and were assured the interviews and information would be anonymous. As a result names have been changed.

Table I: Participants in the Study

Group A Participants:

Name	Gender	Location	Nationality	Marital Status
George	Male	Lisbon, PT	Portugal	Married
David	Male	Lisbon, PT	Portugal	Single
Thomas	Male	Lisbon, PT	Portugal	Married

Group B Participants:

Name	Gender	Intl. Asgmt. Location	Nationality	Marital Status
Amy	Female	Middle East	USA	Married
Jennifer	Female	Europe	USA	Married
Caitlin	Female	Europe	USA	Single
Heather	Female	Europe	Portugal	Single
Jason	Male	Europe	USA	Married
Andrew	Male	Europe	Pakistan	Married
Christopher	Male	Asia	USA	Single
Reid	Male	Asia	USA	Single

Source: elaborated by the author

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Personal Characteristics

Of the participants or interviewees of Group B there were four women and four men. All of the participants, both men and women, in Group B were in their thirties to late forties (e.g. 30-49). Their professional fields include law, finance, management, and engineering and they operated in the industries of chemical, biotech, marketing, technology, and pharmaceuticals.

Two male interviewees had international assignments in Asia, one in Japan, another in China. Two males had an assignment in the European countries of Germany and the UK. One female interviewee had an assignment in the Middle East, and three others in Europe: Switzerland, Holland, and Spain.

Three participants went on assignment with their spouses and/or families, of the remaining five, three were single and two chose to expatriate alone, traveling periodically to visit their family. Of this arrangement one man said: “I decided to travel back and forth because it just seemed easier. With two school age kids it didn’t make sense to move them to Germany for only six months, so I flew back every month or so”(Jason).

One of the female interviewees who decided to bring her family on assignment said the decision was an easy one. She thinks “it was a great learning experience for the girls. [The organization] arranged everything ahead of time so they both went to an international school, they both went to different schools [because of their age], this way they didn’t have to learn German but they did have to take German classes at school” (Jennifer).

All of the interviewees in this group made lateral career moves after repatriating to their home country, one remained with the organization, and of those remaining, all left their organizations within two years of repatriating, all but one within one year.

In regards to demographics my participants are relatively aligned with current averages. In 2012 the Brookfield Relocation Trends Survey it was reported that 20% of expatriates are female while 80% are male. In the 2016 report those numbers have changed with 25% of expatriates as female and 75% male.

On the other hand, among my interviewees, there are less married expatriates than married, deviating from current overall numbers. Current numbers (Brookfield 2016) state that 49% of expatriates are married or partnered males and 19% are married or partnered females; only 22% of expatriates are single men and furthermore, only 10% of expatriates are single women (Brookfield, 2016). As a result of the differences in the profile of study participants, some questions regarding the role of the spouse in various steps of repatriation were not applicable. Additionally, the large number of scholarly articles that emphasize the importance of the family and spouse did not apply to many participants.

Among the other similarities between participants in this study and current trends in the expatriate world are the ages of expats. All of the interviewees were between the age of 30-45, following current numbers of 30% between the ages of 30-39 and 38% between 40-49 years old (Brookfield, 2016). As all of the participants in this study were managers or executives this similarity can be

explained by the typical number of years a person must work in order to be eligible for international assignment, usually a management or executive role.

Additionally, locations of participants' expatriate assignment nearly all appear on Brookfield's current list of top assignment destinations, the one exception being Spain.

4.2 Training

Most of the study participants reported some kind of pre-departure training and all of those participants who received training reported it being a formal program; half of the training programs were conducted on-site, half off-site.

The degree to which these trainings are helpful to the expatriates, however, is not guaranteed. One participant even said his cultural training was "completely useless." His training for German culture was as he says, "was regionally just totally wrong. They said people were a bit more abrupt like New Yorkers and stuff like that and they had it absolutely backwards. Like you need to be sensitive to this and they're not gonna do this for you, people are rude, people are going to ignore you, they were totally wrong, everyone was wonderful there. They were so understanding of me being American and everyone was worrying about me liking it there, they were kind, sweet, warm, it was great" (Jason). Jason's experience with ineffectual training is not extremely common, with 85% of participating companies in the Global Relocation Trends Report (2012) reporting that their training programs were of good or great value.

Another interviewee mentioned that while she received "a few hours of cultural training, but not a lot, more like a couple of hours [but] it was surprisingly

helpful. It was [about] business culture, it was about greeting people, etc.” She also remarked: “I would have liked to receive more training about how to live there. Getting there, particularly with a three-year-old, not understanding that businesses close during the day, the fact that most people buy their groceries once a day rather than a week at a time, and in the Netherlands there’s really no garbage pick-up, and you have to be seriously, seriously aware of your recycling, I got fined one time for putting envelopes in my trash can, all of those things would have been helpful. Also[, my son] went to day care, and day care is really different I just could have used more training on what it’s like to pick up and move your family” (Caitlin).

In contrast, another interviewee received much more than a few hours of training and was even sent to the company headquarters for three weeks for training. “There wasn’t any [Chinese] business culture training really because they weren’t really interested in how the Chinese run their business instead they just said this is the way you’re going to do it, this is our team and we want you to manage it.” (Reid). When asked if he would have changed anything about the training he said “just more language training, that was the toughest thing about moving.” In fact, the only culturally specific training that was received was by his own request “classes for Mandarin, they were hesitant to offer, I sort of pushed them and they allowed me to have a private tutor [...] for 6 months, only two classes a week, and I had no Mandarin before that whatsoever.”

Of the participants in this study only one had a spouse who also received training. This training however happened “once [they] arrived in Switzerland. Someone came to the house for half a day and told [my husband and I] all about

the culture and told us some useful everyday things we wouldn't have known otherwise. It was pretty helpful" (Jennifer).

When asked about training, one of the two participants who received no training at all said: "I don't know if it was because I already knew Japanese and had been there before, but I didn't receive anything at all. [My organization] knew that I had been to Japan before and since I spoke the language already, maybe they just assumed. I don't know if that would be different if someone else had gone that didn't have any experience with Japan" (Christopher).

This trend of not providing training to expatriates who are already familiar with the host country was true for other participants as well. When asked why they did not receive training for his assignment, one interviewee said "it's because it's really the same. If I went somewhere else really significantly different from the [California] office I know I'd get cultural training, probably language courses, but I already speak the language and it's the UK, so no preparation is really necessary" (Andrew).

The other participant who received no training agreed saying "You know, Spain and Portugal they aren't considered so different. I already know Madrid so it was not a big move but I know that [the organization] provided formal trainings and courses in language for people from places like Kenya or Asia. Maybe if I asked for language class they would have given it but I didn't need it." (Heather)

This sentiment is supported by interviews conducted with a few senior Human Resources Managers in Portugal. When asked to comment on the training expatriates receive before their departure one said "well there isn't any if you are going somewhere in Europe. I mean from [Portugal] to Spain or Germany or

Norway or whatever we know it's not the same but it's not a different world. We are still Europe. Of course we can help if the people [going on assignment] need some language course or some extra skill training but we only do the cultural [training] when the persons are going somewhere really far like Asia or Africa" (David). Another senior HR manager also said "it doesn't make sense to give training if we go to send someone to France, for example, yes, okay, the language and culture it's different but it's not like bowing or different alphabets or something. The most common place we have to do training for its Russia and Asia. Since the life and the way of business it's different there, its more important to have that training. You know, if not, the people feel lost a little bit and you know [the organization] wants to help and wants all of our people to be successful." (George)

Furthermore, the findings here support current trends as well. According to the 2012 Global Relocation Trends Report and Mercer's (2011) Report, cross-cultural training is a staple of expatriate assignment. Studies have proven the importance of cross-cultural training (Bennett, Aston, & Coiquhoun, 2000; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005; Kassar, Rouhana, & Lythreatis, 2015). The Global Relocation Trends Report (2012) says that 81% of companies across the globe make cross-cultural training available for some or all assignments and 37% said it is available for all assignments. The previous quotes from participants may explain why not all companies provide training for all assignments. If the culture of the host country is considered very similar or you are already familiar with it, it may be seen as an unnecessary use of resources.

Training, as a part of the expatriate experience, is crucial for the success of most assignments. The absence of training for some of the expatriates is surprising and seems to work against organizations' relationships with their employees. It is obvious that many of the participants in these interviews would have liked to have more training in addition to what they received.

The general policy that the Human Resource professionals communicated in the interviews to only provide training to expatriates if they were going to a place perceived to be of "a different world" seems to be accepted by the expatriate employees if they also hold the same belief. However, if the opinions of the organization do not align with those of the expatriate employee, it appears that it is viewed as negative (by the expatriate employees), leaving the expatriate employee feeling as though there ought to have been more organizational support in the form of training.

Although training was considered by our participants to be an important element of the expatriation process it does not appear to be an important factor that determined these repatriates' ultimate decision to leave the organization.

4.3 Organizational Support and Communication

Within this category is where participants' experience with their organization begins to be quite variable. In regards to communication with their home office about half of the participants had regular communication but most communication was not planned or organized. One participant said "sometimes it was email, sometimes it was a phone call, and you know usually every three months someone from the [parent country] office came to the [host country office] one so they would pull me aside to see how everything was going" (Reid).

Three participants even reported daily communication with their home office, explaining that because of the nature of their work they had no choice but to maintain constant contact. One said: "the U.K. office I was at [on assignment] was one of the offices that we worked with everyday in [California], so even before I was there we communicated with them on a daily basis. Me being there, if anything, made it happen even more" (Andrew). Another participant said "oh we talked everyday, since I was there representing [the organization] in negotiations I was constantly checking with them and updating them on the progress, it just had to be done to get the work finished" (Jason).

Others were far less frequent. The one participant whose assignment was in the Middle East said there was almost no communication. "The work in Abu Dhabi was all about things happening in the area so outside of check ups which I know weren't scheduled or anything, we didn't communicate much with them until we had to plan to go back [to the parent country](Amy). Thankfully Amy's experience was abnormal in this study.

All of the participants reported what some referred to as an “obvious” increase in communication preceding their return to their home country, but only in regards to logistics. “When it was time to go back [to the home office] we had to talk more to organize all the details. [The organization] had a contract with a moving company who did all the packing and transporting it back so there was some back and forth there” (Reid). And “because [the organization] handled the moving there were some things we had to do on top of the usual communication for it to go smoothly” (Jennifer).

In terms of support, most of the participants reported feeling supported by their organization. One participant however was not among them. She stated: “oh it was like they abandoned us. They dropped us off with no information, not a care, they didn't do anything for us when we arrived in Abu Dhabi. I'm honestly kind of angry now just thinking about it. I just couldn't believe it. I had to figure everything out for [my spouse and I]” (Amy).

Thankfully that experience is not the norm, most organizations have a system in place in order to assist expatriates during their assignment and in their return to the parent country. All of the participants in this study reported that they felt the return to their home office was organized in a systematic way, with little to do themselves. Three participants in particular said they were “well taken care of.” One said “yeah coming back was great, [the organization] really took care of everything, all I had to do was tell them some times and organize with the company doing the move and someone at the office and then it was just done. The whole thing, going and coming back was very smooth, [the organization] does this for people all the time so I'm sure it's pretty well thought out” (Andrew). Another

expressed a similar sentiment about their organization saying that “[my organization] really took care of us. It was easy to move back, I mean logistically, like really easy, we had movers, they moved us out and then the same company moved us in when we got back. If there’s one thing [the organization] does well it’s that, and I know its like that for [all expatriates]” (Jennifer).

For the interviewees here organizational support and communication was not a factor in the ultimate decision to leave the organization. With the exception of one interviewee, none of the others were negatively affected by the level of organizational support and communication received. Within this study it appears that as long as a minimal level of organizational communication and support is maintained, it is not a deciding factor in the ultimate decision to turnover after repatriation.

It should be mentioned however, that in cases of such poor support and communication as with our interviewee Amy, any form of organizational “abandonment” as she called it, is likely to have a negative effect on the relationship between the organization and the expatriate in the long-term as it did with Amy who says she still maintains negative feelings about her and her spouse’s experience with their support in the Middle East.

Although Amy and her husband did not decide to leave their assignment early, the situation they experienced resonates with that of the participants in Cole and Nesbeth (2014). The participants in that study reported situations such as the abandonment they experienced as the most significant factor in the decision to leave the international assignment early. Because they chose to say but ultimately

left the organization after repatriating it is very likely that the poor organizational support influenced that decision.

4.4 Expectations and Career Development

For the majority of the participants, expectations is where the organizations really failed. While all participants said they met with their organization and there was a discussion about the effect their time abroad would have on their career with the company, they felt like the organization misrepresented its true effect on their careers.

Organizations all expressed to these expatriates that this assignment would be something the organization valued at the least, and at the most, would lead them to a promotion. One participant felt the organization's management of her return was "where they didn't do so well. When we were [on assignment] everything was really efficient and obviously organized but once I was back in the office it was like they weren't ready for me. There was a position available in the treasury office, and with my finance background that was fine, I understood it was a lateral move but probably temporary[...] Before the assignment [the organization] really gave the impression that I would be promoted, this experience was pitched to me originally as a sort of grooming and development step for my career, for something more in the organization. In the end it was just time to go, I was passed over for a promotion twice so it was time" (Jennifer).

Jennifer's experience is a reflection of what Vidal *et al* (2008) discovered in their study. Jennifer's level of perceived job prospects at her company was low and as a result her intentions to leave the organization were higher, and she eventually

followed through on her intention and turned over. If her organization had invested more in the management of her, and possibly of other expatriate employees' professional careers, she may still be employed with that organization. Strangely, her organization effectively raised her perceived career support and as a result her perceived level of career prospects but were not effective of providing those career prospects in due course.

One trend represented in these results is the frequency of making repatriates redundant upon their return. This is by far the most egregious example of poor career planning on the part of the organization. One interviewee said: "Well the biggest surprise was that even though they said 'this will be valuable in your future here' I was laid off a few months after I came back, guess I wasn't that valuable after all!"(Caitlin) This same thing happened to two other participants; although they were given assurances of the value of their overseas experience with the organization they were made redundant within a year after their return. "I mean it was definitely a surprise, we were talking about renewing my contract for another year and then, I don't know, next time we talked they made it pretty clear that I needed to look for a job" (Reid). Both of these participants had been with their organization for several years before their assignment and received higher amounts of training than other participants. These expatriates serve as excellent examples of organizational oversight of past investments in personnel, particularly in their career development.

Of the interviewees in Group B, all but two have moved on to other organization. When the remaining two were asked why they remained with the organization they had this to say: one said "well I mean they were really clear

about what the year in the U.K. was, it was just a temporary thing and when I came back it would be the same thing that I left. [The organization] did everything really good so there wasn't really, for me, a good reason to leave when I got back, I'm still more or less happy here so it turned out okay" (Andrew). Another also expressed the clarity of the agreement she had with the organization: "the way this works, its like I knew everything was on the same level, it was lateral, I mean I wasn't doing the same thing when I came back but I knew what it would be. And with the crisis here [in Europe] with salaries frozen and everything, nothing was a surprise" (Heather).

The repatriates who turned over were asked to advise their organization on how they could better retain their employees. One said simply "just be honest. I mean it definitely doesn't sound great to say 'this will change nothing' but if there's no way they value the time, then that's really what happened" (Reid). Another recommended better career planning; "I just think they should be better about the procedure after returning, have a job in place, not just pick the one available. They really made it seem like this was going to lead to something, some progress in my career, but it didn't follow what I had been told. It made leaving an easier decision." She further expressed her surprise saying "it's kind of crazy because my time [on assignment] was a really valuable resume item and really was as valuable as they said it would be [...ironically,] they are the ones who didn't really see the value"(Jennifer).

This poor career management strategy, or lack thereof, is a product of what Allen & Alvarez (1998:32) refer to as the "out of sight, out of mind" situation. In this case which repatriates are told that although the organization valued them

they were not able to put them into a better position or just placed them in whatever position was available, a problematic trend documented as early as 1988 (Tung).

These comments are well aligned with the research. As stated earlier, in the latest Brookfield (2016) study 83% of organizations don't have a formal repatriation strategy linked to career management/planning and retention system. This is a frankly shocking statistic considering that a number of authors have reported that lack of organization and planning for repatriates in the home office is a cause of dissatisfaction (Van Heijden *et al*, 2009; Sanches *et al*, 2000; Vidal *et al*, 2008) and can be seen as an indicator of repatriate turnover.

Expectations and career development are quite obviously the factors that affected these interview participants the most in terms of their ultimate decision to turnover from their organization. While training and organizational support while abroad has an effect on the expatriate employees, the inability for an organization to follow through on promises made to their employees is the one that has a lasting effect.

We know from Suutari and Brewster (2003) that one of the primary reasons an employee accepts an international assignment is because they believe it will be beneficial to their career, the failure to do so may motivate repatriates to turnover as they will be dissatisfied. Black *et al* (1999) and Pickard (1999) have demonstrated the importance of meeting expectations and creating job satisfaction and as such, the lack of these things will likely lead to a higher rate of turnover. It has been observed in these interviews that treating repatriates with lateral

professional movements and no promotions or making an employee redundant after their return certainly has this effect.

5. Conclusion

Often overlooked and chronically under researched, repatriation turnover is a problem that still faces multinational organizations all over the world. Over the span of several months this exploratory study sought to determine what organizational methods have the greatest impact on repatriate employees' ultimate decision to remain with or leave their organization.

Using a small and nonrandom sample of former expatriates, primarily from the United States, as well as a small group of senior Human Resources Managers, this study used a qualitative form of research methodology in the form of short semi-structured interviews. These interviews focused on the areas of training, organizational support and communication, and expectations and career management.

The results of this study confirmed the persistent existence of the problem of repatriate turnover. Of the individual participants, nearly all of them left their organization within two years of returning from international assignment and nearly all of them voiced concerns about one or more of their organization's methods.

The study showed that while training and organizational support and communication were important and affected the feelings of their repatriates, in expectations and career development is where organizations truly began to lose their employees. Unfortunately, as we have learned from some recent studies

(Mercer, 2011; Brookfield, 2016; KPMG, 2015) career development is not an area that is focused on by multinational organizations for their repatriates and it shows. Poor management of repatriates' and their futures within the organization was shown to be the most significant factor in the ultimate decision to leave the organization. This lack of career development caused some organizations in our study to lose some of their most valuable resources and waste a significant investment made in that person.

As the most significant factor that determines an employee's decision to turnover, organizations should be jumping to adjust their systems of career development for repatriates.

This study's sample makes it impossible to generalize to all multinational organizations but demonstrates the need for this type of study to be carried out on a large scale, with a significantly higher number of people in a wider array of nationalities, companies, and industries. It sheds light on an area of study that has been largely neglected by the academic community, but has far-reaching effects on many medium and large multinational organizations. Highlighting this weak spot in organizational methods of repatriating employees may prompt managers of relevant areas to reassess their methods of repatriation and perhaps adjust them to be more effective in organizing for the return of their repatriates. Retaining these repatriates after all, is representative of retaining a costly monetary investment and the knowledge those employees may impart upon their professional colleagues.

George Santayana, a Spanish American philosopher and writer, once said: "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it" (Smith, 2013). The

history of poor methods of repatriating employees does not need to persist in the future of multinational organizations; They should learn from history, and fix the problem for the future of the organization and the future of their employees.”

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Appendix A

INTERVIEWS OUTLINE

- I. Personal Characteristics
 - a. What is your name, field, position at the time of international assignments and current position, and the location of your various assignments?
 - b. Have you changed professional position and firm after the assignments?
 - c. Sex, age, marital status, children. Did your family accompany you during your assignments?
- II. Training
 - a. What training did you receive before your international assignments?
 - i. Formal or informal program?
 - ii. In-house or off-site?
 - iii. How many hours/courses?
 - b. What was the nature of the training?
 - i. Leadership?
 - ii. International Management?
 - iii. Language?
 - iv. Cross-cultural?
 - c. Did your family (who accompanied you) receive any kind of training?
 - d. How much, if any, training did you receive prior to your return to the home country?
- III. Organizational Support and Communication
 - a. How often did you communicate with your home office?
 - i. How? (email/social media/phone/video call)
 - b. What was the nature of your communication?
 - i. Related to current work? Or related to HR logistics?
 - c. Did the frequency of your communication fluctuate at all before your return to the home country?
 - d. Was your return to the home country prepared in a systematic way?
- IV. Expectations
 - a. What were your expectations of your professional life when you returned from assignment? Was there a career plan?
 - i. Were they related to progress in your career in the firm (new tasks, new challenges, upwardly movements)? Or were they related to a change of firm?
 - ii. Did your home office give you reason for these expectations?
 - iii. Were they met?
 - iv. Do you believe these expectations were well founded?

- b. If you changed firm after some of your assignments, which were the main reasons for it?
- c. What would you advise your firm to do in order to retain repatriates after assignments?

V. Related Experiences

- a. Ask for elaboration throughout but also leave time at the end for any final stories, opinions, or general thoughts on their experience.
Best/worst part, where they feel the company excelled/failed, etc